

SA helps probe 'chemical attack'

MAPUTO — An SA medical team arrived in Maputo yesterday to examine Mozambican soldiers said to have died from exposure to poison gas following an attack on a Renamo base.

SA trade representative in Maputo Dawid Laubscher confirmed yesterday SA was helping in the investigation as part of assistance provided by the Joint Security Commission.

The matter was also discussed at a meeting held by the commission last week with SA represented by army commander Gen George Meiring.

In the incident, which took place in mid-January at Macaene, 10km from the the Kruger National Park, an army unit was attacked after driving Renamo forces from a base at Ngungwe, 15km from the park's border and roughly on the same line of latitude as Pietersburg

TIM COHEN

A witness interviewed by Reuters in Maputo last week said a projectile had exploded between 50m-75m overhead, releasing a dense cloud of black smoke.

SIMON BARBER reports from Washington that diplomatic sources say 20 soldiers died and many more had to be hospitalised after the attack.

SA involvement was "one of the angles that is being studied", a US official said, but added that the use of chemical agents had yet to be confirmed.

Washington sources say Mozambique has thus far avoided pointing a finger at SA, and blames the incident solely on Renamo.

But Laubscher, who met Mozambican officials yesterday, said he doubted that Renamo was responsible because involvement in chemical warfare would seriously affect its diplomatic relations at a time when it was gaining international respect.

In addition, peace talks in Rome had reached a delicate stage and Renamo and Mozambique were close to signing a protocol which would resolve political differences.

□ Sapa-AP yesterday carried a report by Mozambique's national news agency AIM saying that Renamo rebels killed 18 people in suburbs near Maputo on Tuesday.